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# The Modern Major Remodelling of the Gilbert and Sullivan Operas

Following the success of *The Gondoliers* (1889), Gilbert wrote to Sullivan: 'It gives one the chance of shining right through the twentieth century.' However, while this prophecy was largely fulfilled, clouds of cultural disapproval have darkened over the Savoy operas since the start of the present century, especially with regard to the mockery of women's education at the heart of *Princess Ida* (1884) and, most pointedly, the demeaning and ostensibly racist depiction of the Japanese in *The Mikado* (1885). On the other hand, the largely overlooked *Utopia, Limited* (1893) has experienced a boom in productions over the last decade, seemingly due to its subject matter, which, as one recent critic put it, make it 'an anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist comic opera'. He also argues that, while some of the traditional performance practices associated with *The Mikado* ought to be re-evaluated, recent objections to the spirit of the opera as a whole are not entirely justified, and that a re-evaluation of the validity of some (but not all) of the performance practices traditionally associated with *The Mikado* is both just and timely. Alan Fischler is a Professor of English at Le Moyne College, Syracuse. He is the author of *Modified Rapture: Comedy in W. S. Gilbert's Savoy Operas* (University of Virginia Press, 1991) and 'Drama' in the *Blackwell Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* (2014), among many other articles on Gilbert and nineteenth-century theatre.

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THE TWELFTH product of the collaboration between W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *The Gondoliers*, had its premiere performance on 7 December 1889. Both audience and critics were relieved to see that the partners had decided not to delve deeper into the vein of somewhat more serious opera that had been opened by their previous piece, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, but had returned to the mildly satirical and logically contorted comedy that had been their mother lode. According to one review, the audience expressed its approval by cheering till 'weary of cheering any more', and the critics themselves waxed rapturous in their praises.<sup>1</sup>

Even before this triumph, the partners were secure about their prominence. As Gilbert put it in an 1887 letter to Sullivan: 'We are world-known, and as much an institution as Westminster Abbey.'<sup>2</sup> But the latest deafening accolades raised hopes not just of prominence but permanence, as Gilbert now wrote to his partner: 'I must

thank you for the magnificent work you have put into the piece. It gives one the chance of shining right through the twentieth century with a reflected light.'<sup>3</sup>

In the one hundred and twenty-eight years since then, however, that light has been refracted through multiple lenses. Certain flashes of Gilbert's wit, which once were bright and topical, have since become archaic, dulled, or simply incomprehensible to most audiences. Thus, the University of St Andrews's Gilbert and Sullivan Society, the Opera-Lytes of Buffalo, New York, and the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Chester County, Pennsylvania, have all within the last three years mounted productions that redirect the satire in *Patience*, which had originally targeted the affected behaviour of adherents to the Aesthetic Movement of the late nineteenth-century, towards hippies of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, a 2009 version of *Iolanthe* at Brown University reimagined the friendship between the two male leaders of the House of Lords as

a romance,<sup>5</sup> while a 2016 production at Wagner College transplanted the opera from the Houses of Parliament to the halls of the American Congress, albeit in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> Updating the references in Ko-Ko's 'little list / Of social offenders who might well be underground / And who never would be missed' to include people currently notable and notorious in politics and popular culture has long since been standard performance practice.<sup>7</sup>

### Cultural Sensitivity or Political Correctness?

The most significant revisions and revulsions related to Gilbert's libretti have derived from that which might be called cultural sensitivity by some, and political correctness by others. Nor was it long before objections on this basis began to crop up. Although Sullivan died in 1900, Gilbert was still very much alive when, in 1907, the Lord Chamberlain, in anticipation of an official visit to Britain by Prince Fushimi of Japan, withdrew the licence for stage presentations of *The Mikado*.

The rationale was that the buffoonish presentation of the characters in the opera, including the monarch, might be offensive to the Japanese and, with Japan being a rising power, as demonstrated by its recent military victory over Russia, the British government wished to cultivate the goodwill of its guests. Opposition to this censorship came quickly: Gilbert himself went to remonstrate with the Lord Chamberlain, a petition was presented directly to King Edward, and one MP rose during Prime Minister's Questions to ask whether 'the Right Honourable Gentleman [is] aware that the action of the Lord Chamberlain in this matter has made this country ridiculous in the eyes of the civilized world'. The newspapers further recorded:

Mr Vincent Kennedy, MP, has given notice that he will ask the Prime Minister whether his attention has been called to the fact that in the play of *Hamlet*, the King of Denmark is portrayed as a murderer; and whether, in view of the fact that Denmark is a friendly power, and this reference to the King is liable to cause offence in Denmark, he

will ask the Lord Chamberlain to prohibit the production of this play.<sup>8</sup>

*Hamlet*, however, went on, but it was six weeks before the ban was rescinded.

Fast forward to our own time. *The Mikado*, after more than a hundred years as the most popular and most praised of all the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, has attracted new demands that it be unofficially banned or, at the very least, radically altered. Much of the recent opposition focuses on a performance practice that dates back to the premiere – that is, the use of make-up by predominantly white casts to make themselves look Asian. In 2014, Sharon Pian Chan, writing for *The Seattle Times*, responded to the opening of the Seattle Gilbert and Sullivan Society's production with a column titled 'The Yellowface of *The Mikado* in Your Face', an analogy, of course, to the practice of white performers using blackface make-up in minstrel shows of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She claimed:

*The Mikado* is the same shtick, different race. A black wig and white face-powder stand in for shoeshine. Bowing and shuffling replaces tap dancing. Fans flutter where banjos would be strummed. . . . *The Mikado* opens old wounds and resurrects pejorative stereotypes. The caricature of Japanese people as strange and barbarous was used to justify the internment of Japanese Americans during World War Two.<sup>9</sup>

Still, in the following year, despite the well-publicized furore in Seattle, the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players announced plans to stage *The Mikado* without declaring any intention to modify traditional performance practices. Upon receiving the company's flyer, playwright Leah Winkler wrote: 'When yellowface *Mikado* happened in Seattle I thought this would never happen in NYC. I was wrong.'

Ming Peiffer, an equally exasperated playwright, asked: 'Why must we once again go through the panoply of politically correct racial discourse to explain why [INSERT OUTDATED ASIAN MUSICAL HERE] is offensive? Is incorrect. Is "racist"?' The company responded by cancelling the



Wagner College's updated *Iolanthe*, transplanted to the US Congress.

production and issuing an apology, claiming they had

never intended to give offence and the company regrets the missed opportunity to adapt its production of Gilbert and Sullivan's one-hundred-and-thirty-year-old satire of Victorian society to respond to contemporary criticism of some elements of traditional performance practice.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, in 2016, when the organization tried again, the crew and cast included Asians, and Asian arts groups were called in to consult.

### 'Commodity Racism' in *The Mikado*

However, for those who consider the opera inherently offensive, even new versions attempting to edit out offensive elements have not been deemed acceptable. A 2016 production by the Harvard-Radcliffe Gilbert and Sullivan Players was set in a Las Vegas hotel with all characters transformed to white Americans, and criticism slammed the directors for avoiding the racial issues raised by the show. A staff writer for the *Harvard Crimson* similarly claimed that the casting of the female role of Katisha with a male in drag 'appears also surprisingly, if unintentionally, offensive towards transgender identity'.<sup>11</sup> Other amended versions have also been criticized, including Jonathan Miller's 1986 English National Opera production:

It's the exoticism in these performances that is still a problem, says W. Anthony Sheppard, a music professor at Williams College. Even in productions set in, say, an English hotel in the 1920s (and starring British comedian Eric Idle), the verbal and musical Japanese flourishes remain, he says. And this points to the real source of offence: the condescension inherent when someone uses the aesthetics of another culture as ornament.<sup>12</sup>

Corollary objections, unrelated to specific productions, have been raised in academic discourse. In her 2010 book on *The Mikado* titled *The Japan of Pure Invention*, Josephine Lee applied Anne McClintock's term 'commodity racism' to the presentation of

Japanese people as living versions of the pictures that Western eyes admired on screens, fans, and other items for sale:

The allure of the commodity racism felt in these first *Mikados* was potent indeed. The opera is a prime example of how the understanding of racial difference can be shaped by the interaction of consumers and goods rather than by experiences of body contact. *The Mikado's* extraordinary power to define what was Japanese harnessed the energies of the Japan craze but also changed its dynamics.<sup>13</sup>

Wendy S. Williams, commenting on Lee's book, concluded:

The British regarded Japan from a stance of superiority and anxiety. The British fascination with all things Japanese and the confident assertions about the Japanese people revealed a need to classify the rapidly modernizing Japan and to assert dominance over it.<sup>14</sup>

*The Mikado* has not been the only Gilbert and Sullivan opera to offend twenty-first-century cultural and political sensibilities. *Princess Ida*, its immediate predecessor, was based on an earlier play by Gilbert titled *The Princess*, which, in turn, was based on Tennyson's extended poetic narrative of the same name, with misogyny ratcheted up with each recension. The title character has founded a university exclusively for women, with the intent of wholly and permanently separating her gender from men and, specifically, of protecting herself from the claims of the prince to whom she was engaged in infancy.

For Gilbert, *Ida's* educational project is merely a matter for mockery and, while she herself is portrayed as sincere and even courageous, she is also enough of an 'airhead' to need a reminder, in the final scene, that total isolation of the sexes from one another would spell the end of the human race. Not only is this obviously unpalatable today, it was unpalatable to some Victorians, perhaps including Sullivan, who made *Princess Ida* the grandest soprano part in all the Savoy operas and wrote strong, serious, noble music for her two major arias.



Above: production of *The Mikado Reclaimed* by the Generic Ensemble Company at the Vortex Theater in Austin, Texas, set in an internment camp (photo: Sandy Carson). Below: the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players production of *The Mikado*, 2016, with non-Asian costumes and make-up (photo: Julieta Cervantes).



Not surprisingly, in 2015, when Brown University Gilbert and Sullivan determined to present the opera with an *Ida* who is 'thoughtful, poised, and steady in her beliefs', emphasis was apparently placed on the musical aspect of her Act Three solo, described by the director as 'an aria that was initially intended to highlight what a fool [she is]' but sung in the Brown production so as to 'allow the audience to

lament alongside her as she mourns the inevitable ruin of all that she had worked for'.<sup>15</sup> In 2016, Gilbert and Sullivan Chicago likewise reacted against the sexual politics of the libretto in planning its production, issuing the following declaration:

At times ignorant, at times condescending, but at all times possessing an undercurrent of Victorian-era sexism . . . the script for *Princess Ida* is ripe for an overhaul. Thus, with all due deference to the source material, an overhaul of the ending to Act Three proved to be not only appropriate but eminently necessary, in order to recast Ida as champion of her ideals, while resolving the principal conflict as an essential compromise born of royalty, rather than an uncomfortable defeat of the aspirations of an entire gender. In this version, Ida recognizes her political and personal compromise in order to drastically expand her power and influence – a common historical reality among European royalty. The ensemble concludes the operetta by declaring that every role assumed by Ida in the story – princess, scholar, and warrior – is equally legitimate, none more preferable or proper than any other.<sup>16</sup>

Still, while the changes effected in these two productions may have been made in response to the opera's political problems, they also point towards the two fundamental aesthetic flaws in the original: a lamely managed denouement, and a title character created by a librettist and composer at odds with one another about whether she ought to be laughed at or lauded. These aesthetic problems are really the reason that the opera is seldom performed today, which renders rather irrelevant the political question of whether it ought to be performed.

*Ida*, however, is not the only Gilbert and Sullivan piece to have been indicted on charges of sexism and adjusted accordingly. In 2016, Shawna Lucey was asked to direct a 'pro-feminist' *Pirates of Penzance* in Milwaukee for Skylight Music Theatre's 'season celebrating women'. Lucey's initial response was: 'Feminism and *Pirates of Penzance*? . . . How am I gonna make these silly girls feminist? And what am I gonna do about Ruth, and how does that work?'<sup>17</sup> Yet she succeeded in favourably distinguishing the females from the males:

The men in *Pirates* are slaves to duty. They are so absolutely literal that it binds them to ridiculous aspects of their station and therefore to their fates. . . . The strength of the women is their clever ability to wiggle around duty and not become enslaved by it in order to create a happy life for themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Through the performance of actress Diane Lane, Ruth was seen as evolving towards strength, as one reviewer noted: 'Ruth's pleading personality wishing for romance in the first half changes into a woman of power dressed in pirate's clothing, with her own mind and manners, under Lane's veteran talents.'<sup>19</sup>

A more radical re-conception of the character is reflected by a casting call in *Backstage* for a Summer 2016 production by the Barrington Stage Company in Massachusetts, where the lovesick woman whom Frederic rejects as 'plain and old'<sup>20</sup> is described thus:

She is attractive enough for her age but cares very little about such things. She wants nothing more in life than to see Frederic happy, healthy, and by her side. It is from her that Frederic learned to be so polite, honourable, to cherish respectability, and to give himself so wholly and immediately to love. The feelings between Ruth and Frederic are the deep feelings of a mother and son.<sup>21</sup>

However, recent objections to Gilbert's gender attitudes extend a good deal wider. In an article written in anticipation of Mike Leigh's 2015 version of *Pirates* for English National Opera, Rupert Christiansen gave vent to a more generalized lament about the librettist:

If only he wasn't such a classically terrible old sexist: he clearly combines a low opinion of women's intellect (*Princess Ida* takes a dismally dim view of the establishment of women's university colleges) with a leering eye for a pretty silly girl, and even in his own day, his contempt for susceptible elderly spinsters (such as Lady Jane in *Patience*) was considered needlessly cruel and even offensive.

In the same article, Christiansen quotes Leigh revealing that, when ENO asked him to direct a Gilbert and Sullivan piece of his choosing, he passed over *Iolanthe*, one of his personal favourites, because,

'I find the sexism a bit hard to stomach.'<sup>22</sup> Yet, in her review of Leigh's *Pirates*, Fiona Maddocks pounced upon the very issue that had been the cause of the director's indigestion, saying that the reader who might have 'first encountered Gilbert and Sullivan in the cradle' will not 'have noticed that, as plot devices go, mocking a woman for her spinsterish plainness might be both cruel and misogynistic'. She also pointed out that 'Ruth, aged forty-seven, the piratical maid-of-all-work in the same opera, seemed merely an old hag-bag figure of fun'.<sup>23</sup>

Andrew Crowther concurred, arguing that the 'man-trapping spinsters' are a particular problem:

In *The Pirates of Penzance*, forty-seven-year-old Ruth is in love with twenty-one-year-old Frederic – a situation fraught with hilarity, as when one of the pirates assures Frederic, 'there are the remains of a fine woman about Ruth'. The humour is unremittingly cruel, playing on the chucklesome basis that Ruth isn't as young as she used to be. It's uncomfortable viewing, undoubtedly. . . . The other operas contain plenty of examples of the foolish-older-woman-chasing-a-younger-man plot device, but the extreme is reached in *The Mikado* with the character of the elderly Katisha, a blood-thirsty, voracious, sadistic predator.

It is little wonder, then, that the subheading of Crowther's article stated that the 'cruel misogyny of many of G&S's plots make their operas increasingly unpalatable – and unfunny – in today's age'.<sup>24</sup>

To Crowther's examples might be added the unseen 'elderly, ugly daughter' of the rich attorney whom the Judge of *Trial by Jury* once cultivated in his quest for career advancement. The Judge's autobiographical song says of his sometime prospective father-in-law:

'You'll soon get used to her looks,' said he,  
'And a very nice girl you'll find her!  
She may very well pass for forty-three  
In the dusk with a light behind her.'<sup>25</sup>

But the list of relevant instances ought not to stop here. Like Ruth and Katisha, Sir Joseph in *HMS Pinafore*, the Lord Chancellor in *Iolanthe*, Ko-Ko in *The Mikado*, and

the aforementioned Judge all make themselves ridiculous through pursuing significantly younger mates.

Ko-Ko has had to resort to training Yum-Yum in order to make himself appear a credible candidate in her eyes; when he agrees to allow Nanki-Poo to marry her for a month, he asks: 'You see, I've educated her to be my wife; she's been taught to regard me as a wise and good man. Now I shouldn't like her views on that point disturbed.' And Nanki-Poo replies: 'Trust me, she shall never learn the truth from me.'<sup>26</sup>

Again, in the finale to *Trial by Jury*, the age disparity between the Judge and his bride-to-be appears to be the reason that the Defendant wonders aloud, 'I wonder whether / They'll live together / In marriage tether / In manner true?'<sup>27</sup> Far more explicit and demeaning is the critique to which, in *The Sorcerer*, young Constance subjects the Notary, the 'plain old man' to whom she has affianced herself as a result of a magic spell:

He's dry and snuffy, deaf and slow,  
Ill-tempered, weak and poorly!  
He's ugly, and absurdly dressed,  
And sixty-seven nearly,  
He's everything that I detest . . .<sup>28</sup>

This is surely as contemptuous as anything said about any of Gilbert's female characters; and even when Ko-Ko refers to Katisha as 'A most unattractive old thing / . . . With a caricature of a face', he refrains from cataloguing her particular defects in front of the whole village, which is just what Constance does.<sup>29</sup> But there is not much evidence of twenty-first-century directors rushing to revision when the figures of such mockery are male.

The actual issue, then, that is raised by Gilbert's frequent romantic mismatches is not sexism but ageism. Yet just consideration of this requires additional context. Ever since Aristotle noted the origins of comedy in fertility ritual, many a critic has used this connection to explain the marked tendency of comic plots to conclude with the marriage of two age-appropriate mates

with youth enough for their union to have reproductive promise.<sup>30</sup>

Mockery of older, biologically unsuitable aspirants to the affections of virile and/or fertile juvenile characters was thus a well-established convention of comedy by the time that Gilbert began his work in the genre, and it can only have been given an edge by the Darwinian notions of natural selection that were becoming current when his work with Sullivan started. Indeed, 1871, the year of their first collaboration (*Thespis*), was also the year of the publication of *The Descent of Man*. This is not to say that any form of bigotry is to be excused on the grounds of either tradition or of widespread adherence to it, but it does imply that the roots of the ageism found in the Savoy operas go deeper than Gilbert's particular prejudices – very odd prejudices, it must be said, for a man happily married to a woman who was eleven years his junior.

Still, those who react with a kneejerk against Gilbert's older females find themselves in good company, for Sullivan did the same. When it came to *Utopia, Limited*, the thirteenth product of the partnership, the composer's misgivings boiled over on seeing another incarnation of a character type of whom, he thought, 'Katisha was to be the last example'. He wrote to Gilbert: 'If there is to be an old or middle-aged woman at all in the piece, is it necessary that she should be very old, ugly, raddled, and perhaps grotesque', or that such a character 'should be seething with love and passion (requited or unrequited) and other feelings not usually associated with old age?' Gilbert replied that his partner had, perhaps, failed to grasp his intention:

Most assuredly it is not necessary that she should be 'very old, ugly, raddled, or grotesque' – she may be and should be . . . a dignified lady of forty-five or thereabouts, and no more ugly than God Almighty has made the lady who is to play the part. Nor do I propose that she should be seething with love and passion. She is in love with the King (as a lady of forty-five may very well be with a man of fifty) – but her frenzy is not that of the gross or animal type at all, as you seem to imagine.<sup>31</sup>

Lady Sophy is, indeed, a paragon of anti-animal prudery: when the King remarks that his Second Housemaid has only one leg, she jumps 'suspiciously' upon his statement: 'How do you know that?'<sup>32</sup> And Lady Sangazure in *The Sorcerer*, Little Buttercup in *HMS Pinafore*, Dame Hannah in *Ruddigore*, Dame Carruthers in *The Yeomen of the Guard*, and the Duchess of Plaza-Toro in *The Gondoliers* are likewise middle-aged women who are in love with age-appropriate males, and only in the case of the predatory Dame Carruthers does the pursuit of such a mate invite ridicule. This has not, however, prevented some from simply assuming that Gilbert tarred all women over forty with the same sexist brush.

Besides, even if Sullivan's criticisms had some validity, Lady Sophy would still be one of the least of *Utopia's* problems. As an opera, it is not very good. It came towards the end of the Gilbert and Sullivan collaboration, and the creative powers of both were flagging. Sullivan had so much difficulty in setting the opera's finale that, for the first time in all their years of work together, Gilbert allowed him to write the music first and then set words to it.<sup>33</sup>

The libretto is poorly constructed: a subplot focused on a three-way competition for the hand of Princess Zara takes up a good chunk of the first act, but is neither resolved nor even returned to in the second. In the main plot, the princess has imported from England a collection of reformers dubbed 'the Flowers of Progress', whose mission is to endow the backward South Sea island with the social, economic, and legal institutions that have made England great. This allows Gilbert to aim a good many jokes at those institutions, but they nonetheless raise *Utopia* to such perfection that doctors, lawyers, and the military have all been rendered unnecessary, and the Utopian people – like Adam and Eve, dissatisfied with bliss – start to complain and come to the verge of rebellion.

It is only in the final scene that Zara remembers the one crucial element she has neglected to include: government by party.



Introduce that, she says, and the progress of all other reforms will be impeded, producing enough national misery to make everybody happy. Of course, Zara might have brought this to mind at any moment after she has entered with her Englishmen, but then there would have been no opera, which is to say that the denouement is artificially delayed simply to enable the intervening song and dance and jokes, rendering *Utopia* more an amorphous revue than a plot-driven play.

These and other defects are enough to account for the brevity of the piece's first run – its two hundred and forty-five performances represent the lowest total a Gilbert and Sullivan opera had achieved in sixteen years. They may also account for the fact that it was eighty-three more years before it was given a second run by the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, which originally produced most of the operas and continued to do so through the greater part of the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, after it closed in 1893, the stage life of *Utopia, Limited* was undeniably limited – that is, until the last ten years or so. In 2009, *Utopia* was produced by the Seattle Gilbert and Sullivan Society;<sup>35</sup> in 2010, by the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players;<sup>36</sup> in 2011 at the Buxton Opera House in Derbyshire;<sup>37</sup> in 2012, by the Centenary Company in Greenwich and by the Blue Hill Troupe in New York;<sup>38</sup> in 2013, by the Harvard-Radcliffe Gilbert and Sullivan Players;<sup>39</sup> in 2014, by the Lyric Theater of San Jose and the Pittsburgh Savoyards;<sup>40</sup> in 2015, by the Durham Savoyards of North Carolina;<sup>41</sup> and in 2016, at the Cork Midsummer Festival in Ireland.<sup>42</sup> In 2017 alone, it was staged by the Astwood Bank Operatic Society in Worcestershire (March); the University of St Andrews Gilbert and Sullivan Society (April); and the Oxford University Gilbert and Sullivan Society (July).<sup>43</sup> An updated or differently defined Google search might well yield even more results than these.

*Utopia* was a dead letter, and this surge in popularity amounts not so much to a revival as a resurrection. So what explains

the raising of this once-scorned Lazarus? Unless we suppose a sudden, radical alteration in the aesthetic tastes of those who produce and patronize the theatre, the only probable cause is the perceived political content of the opera.

That, indeed, is the element singled out in virtually every advertisement or review of the productions listed above. The Blue Hill Troupe version is described as a 'shockingly relevant satire of imperialism and globalization'; the St Andrews company calls the opera 'a biting satire about capitalism, corruption, and economic imperialism'; a review of the Durham production refers to 'its themes of cultural imperialism and capitalist malfeasance'; and the adaptation in Cork was described as 'as a series of confessional harangues and interrogations on colonialism, racism, justice, immigration, exploitation, and genocide'.<sup>44</sup>

All of this is ironic, as Gilbert's intent in writing the piece was to keep the political content muted. Before the opening, when an interviewer asked if there were 'any politics in the piece', he replied: 'Yes and no. They're vague. You'll find many references to the state of England and some hits at existing abuses, but nothing of a party character. It doesn't do to divide the house.'<sup>45</sup>

But if Gilbert refused to take a stance, contemporary productions have taken one for him and lifted his libretto to the apex of political correctness. This has meant that *Utopia*, although aesthetically third-rate, is enthusiastically welcomed on academic and professional stages, while the political content of the piece long regarded as the partnership's masterwork, *The Mikado*, has raised widespread, angry questions about whether it ought to be performed at all.

Additional ironies lurk here. Although *The Mikado* was banned in 1907 for fear of offending the visiting Prince Fushimi of Japan, on his arrival he expressed his disappointment at not being able to see the production. In spite of the ban – or, perhaps, because of it – Helen D'Oyly Carte arranged a performance in Sheffield and invited Mr Sugimura, a Tokyo jour-

alist accompanying the prince, to attend and offer frank criticism. He responded:

I am deeply and pleasingly disappointed. I came to Sheffield expecting to discover real insults to my countrymen. I found bright music, and much fun, but I could not find the insults. . . . I had a pleasant evening, and I consider that the English people, in withdrawing this play lest Japan should be offended, are crediting my country with needless readiness to take offence.

Sugimura added that, as a representation of Japan, the play was hopelessly inauthentic on many points. First and foremost, the Japanese stage would never present the emperor as a comic character. In addition:

I cannot understand from what part of Japan the author got the names of his characters. Yum-Yum I thought at first to be Num-Num, an incantation to Buddha. Real Japanese girls would not be called Yum-Yum or Peep-Bo. . . . The characters embrace and kiss quite publicly. In my country, this would be quite shocking. No properly brought-up young lady like Yum-Yum would ever dream of doing this. . . . [But] of course, the play shows quite an imaginary world, not in the least like Japan.<sup>46</sup>

Sugimura's comments point to the most fundamental issue raised by defenders of the opera: *The Mikado* is not about the Japanese. Pooh-Bah, the tenant of many official posts, holds distinctly English offices, including Chancellor of the Exchequer, Privy Purse, Secretary of State for the Home Department, and Groom of the Second Floor Front. *The Mikado's* lyrics make reference to such Victorian English phenomena as the music-hall singer, parliamentary trains, classical Monday Pops, and Madame Tussaud's waxworks.

When Ko-Ko explains the difficulties in determining Nanki-Poo's true identity, he says: 'It might have been on his pocket-handkerchief, but Japanese don't use pocket-handkerchiefs,' at which he and all his auditors break into laughter.<sup>47</sup> And when he needs to lie about Nanki-Poo's address, the first place that comes to his mind is Knightsbridge, which, at the time of the opera's premiere, was the site of a Japanese exhibition.

For the English of 1885, there was an aura of exoticism about this exhibition and about Japanese culture in general, as few had had much contact with the actuality. Further, Gilbert tells his audience, in the first words of the opera, that they are indeed looking not at real Japanese people but, rather, at the commoditized images on which their stereotypes were based. The opening chorus sings: 'If you want to know who we are / We are gentlemen of Japan, / On many a vase and jar / On many a screen and fan. / We figure in lively paint; / Our attitude's queer and quaint; / You're wrong if you think it ain't'.<sup>48</sup>

Other references make explicit that the supposedly Japanese elements of the opera are, indeed, just stereotypes and ought to be taken as such: Ko-Ko asks Pooh-Bah if he couldn't manage 'an abject grovel in a characteristic Japanese attitude' as a compliment to Yum-Yum, and Yum-Yum later soliloquizes, 'Sometimes I sit and wonder, in my artless Japanese way, why it is that I am so much more attractive than anybody else in the whole world.'<sup>49</sup> The butts of these jokes are the very stereotypes whose presence is essential to the humour of the piece.

Juxtaposing incompatible elements in order to get laughs is as old as comedy itself: a little boy who comes on stage in his father's shirt, shoes, and trousers is sure to tickle an audience, as would a dog or cat if similarly attired. In earlier Gilbert and Sullivan operas, the presentation of a sorcerer as a middle-class City tradesman, or of fairies cavorting in Westminster, or of pirates as 'noblemen who have gone wrong', did the same trick.<sup>50</sup> The reason *Princess Ida* is not fundamentally funny is that the combination of women and university education is not a blending of incompatibles, although Gilbert meant them to be seen as such, and the very suggestion that the twain should never meet is obviously offensive.

On the other hand, marching a thoroughbred Englishman on to the stage in a kimono and having him answer to such a name as Pish-Tush or Go-To are part

and parcel of effective comedy, and the resultant finger of mockery points to the impersonator rather than to that which he impersonates. This is not to say that those elements of the impersonation now perceived as offensive – yellowface make-up or silly pony-tailed wigs – should not be eliminated from today’s productions, nor is the comedy diminished by their absence. Whatever else might be said about Jonathan Miller’s frequently revived 1986 ENO production – set in an English hotel lobby of the 1920s, with the characters costumed accordingly – it must at least be given credit for accomplishing, albeit by different means, the juxtaposition of incompatibles upon which Gilbert’s comedy is based.

On the other hand, it might be argued that such a work as the Vortex Repertory’s 2016 adaptation, *The Mikado Reclaimed*, where the actors put on the play in an internment camp, although aimed at addressing cultural insensitivity, actually transforms an intrinsically inoffensive work into the opposite by making Asians, rather than the English, the object of the mockery in the piece. The question of whether such productions are aesthetically and/or politically valid, or in any senses better or worse than the 1885 original, lies beyond the boundaries of this article. Still, if this discussion has stirred up thoughts on either side of the question, or ideas of what future productions of any of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas ought to look like, that would be good. If it has actually settled the question in anyone’s mind, that would be astonishing.

## Notes and References

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